

May 31, 1965

Mr. Paul F. Glenn  
Hornblower & Weeks-Hemphill, Noyes  
8 Hanover Street  
New York, New York 10004

Dear Mr. Glenn:

I have been inordinately slow in responding to your letter of April 27, but have been giving considerable thought to the statement enclosed in your letter, which I had also received from Dr. Sinex.

I fully realize that popular support for medical research often stems from some very particular ailment or fear from which a given citizen may be suffering. But I wrestle with my conscience the extent to which we should capitalize on this in a way that may distort the actual patterns of progress in biological science that underlie the advances of medicine. It is very difficult for me to see in what way the fundamental research that is bound to lead to the most significant advances in coping with problems of aging is going to be different from the fundamental research which will have a similar impact on problems ranging from mental retardation to virus disease to birth defects or to cancer. These are all of one piece, and for the most part what is mainly lacking is very fundamental biological knowledge. To that extent I am most reluctant to support statements that would seem to further less than thoughtful crash programs in any of these fields. I would urge you to read the analysis of the research challenge presented by mental retardation indicated by Section II of the enclosed report, which seems to me a prototype of what our approach ought to be in these many connected fields. There are other statements elsewhere in this report with which I am not in whole-hearted agreement, although by and large I am gratified at the consensus that our panel was able to establish. There are, of course, exceptions. I am also enclosing a statement concerning the mechanical heart pump that was recently accepted as testimony before Congressional committees on an NIH development program. We are dealing here with a rather clear-cut issue which can be furthered by allocation of funds and support to a specific mission, in distinction from too many other areas where we simply lack the necessary fundamental knowledge.

Perhaps the intentions of your statement and the ones I just expressed are really not so divergent. It certainly is very important to come to grips with the fundamental issues of aging, and especially the deterioration of personality, in contrast to the acute hazards of cancer and cardiovascular disease. I believe that the elimination of these diseases would indeed considerably extend the average life expectancy, even if it did not prolong vigorous vitality, and it is exactly that discrepancy that disturbs me the most. In response to my own preferences I would also have altered the third paragraph, so that the first sentence would read "The outstanding progress of biochemistry within the past decade encourages the hope of attaining enough understanding of fundamental cellular processes to learn to check the rate of aging in the human individual."

Perhaps in place of making a strident call for a new research program which cannot be very well defined at the present time, and in place of which I would prefer to

Paul F. Glenn

Mr. Paul F. Glenn

May 31, 1965  
Page 2

see efforts towards more general support of basic medical research, I might suggest another alternative, to some extent in keeping with the procedures that led to the report on mental retardation; and one might add, to a noticeable resurgence of interest in this field since that time. My suggestion is to request the President to convene another commission to review the challenges to and current achievements of the biology and medicine of aging, and the possible imbalance of current efforts which may indeed exacerbate the discrepancies between length of life and useful life that we would all deplore. I would gladly support such an inquiry and if you and Dr. Sinex would like me to try my hand at it, and it does not conflict with other efforts that you are already making, I would offer to prepare a draft version of such a letter.

I very much appreciate your efforts on behalf of furthering facilities for medical research. I take no pleasure in your sharing our discovery how difficult it is to obtain the resources for such obviously necessary and constructive activities.

Cordially,

Joshua Lederberg  
Professor of Genetics

cc: Dr. F. Marott Sinex  
Department of Biochemistry  
Boston University School of Medicine

Enclosures:

A Proposed Program for National Action to Combat Mental Retardation,  
Report to the President by the President's Panel on Mental Retardation, 1962.

Engineering Development of the Mechanical Heart-Pump, statement from  
J. Lederberg.